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ABSTRACT

Teachers can follow several guidelines for conducting productive parent-teacher conferences. These include: (1) respecting the parents; (2) being patient; (3) avoiding the use of jargon; (4) discussing the importance of homework and independent reading; (5) establishing a friendly atmosphere; (6) discussing reading and television viewing habits; and (7) encouraging parents to become involved in Parent Teacher Association activities. To prepare for the conference, teachers can anticipate questions that parents might ask. Parents can make notes about information they feel the teacher should know about the student; write down their questions about their child's progress; and reflect on their attitudes towards their child's education. Teachers should recognize that some parents have time constraints that limit their ability to come to school for a conference. In these cases, teachers can use the telephone or suggest a variety of alternative meeting times and places. A self-inventory that parents can use before and after the conference is included. (MM)

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The Parent Teacher Conference

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The parent teacher conference is an important, integral part of the educational process. This paper reviews some issues regarding the parent teacher conference and offers some ideas for improving the conference for the benefit of all involved.

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The parent teacher conference has been with us for many years, yet interestingly enough, there is very little written about it, and scant training for teachers in how to conduct a positive parent teacher conference (P-T-C)

For whatever reason , many parents are afraid of teachers. They may be defensive or apprehensive about the progress or lack thereof of their son/daughter. Their own intellectual inadequacies may come to the fore. Some parents have their own " mind set " when they are summonded to the school for a meeting. They may feel that they have not been doing enough for their child or feel that they cannot do enough for their child. They may feel guilty that they have not been able to provide an encyclopedia or a computer for their child.

For some parents, the P-T-C dredges up memories of when they had to go to school with their parents for some disciplinary infraction or some teacher concern. There may have been later corporal punishment or some admonishment for whatever rule was broken.

In order to have a positive, productive parent teacher conference , the teacher should work to :

a) Give respect to the parent. Most parents are trying quite hard to be good parents. They are concerned about their children's education, yet may not know exactly what to do to enhance their children's reading or other academic success.

b) Give tools and suggestions to the parents as to what they can do. If possible, give a hand out to assist with the homework/review process. Try to be positive and accentuate the good things. Most kids are good kids- but all too often we forget to tell them that. As a diagnostician who often tests kids, I often conclude the testing by telling the girl or boy " Hey, you're a good kid-Anybody ever tell you that ? " Sadly, and regretably, I am often told, " No "

c) Work at establishing rapport. Look for some commonalities. Pay attention to what the parents are saying. Listen !

d) Be Prepared. Have samples of student work nearby. Have grades and the necessary papers nearby. A teacher who frantically searches for files and shuffles through papers does not give a good impression to parents who have taken very valuable time to discuss their child.

e) Remember that parents love their kids. Their priorities may at that specific time be different- they may be dealing with an illness in the family, a job related problem or an interpersonal difficulty. While a teacher may want a child to master long division, the parent may want the child to clean up their room or turn the music of " White Snake or White Rat or White Lion " down !

f) Ask parents for their input as to what seems to work at home.

g) Be patient. Listen to the parent and schedule a follow up meeting if future work is needed. Don't try to accomplish too much in a single setting.

h) Don't get in a fighting/shouting/yelling match. If you feel the conference is not going well, re-schedule or ask an impartial third party or administrative official to be involved.

i) Remember that the single parent family is increasing. This may be stressful for the custodial parent who may not have a mate or spouse to assist them.

j) Don't use jargon and obfuscate the process with technicalities. Don't diagnose and relay educational terminology with which the parent may not be familiar. (Don't say " Your child has an unresolved Oedipal Complex with a percentile rank of 35 on his C.T.B.S. in reading)

k) Reframe problem areas. Instead of saying the child's work is sloppy, instead indicate that the child is capable of doing neater work.

l) Discuss the importance of homework and independent reading. There is much research that suggests that homework and parental involvement have direct and indirect effects on achievement (for a review see Keith and Page, 1985 ; Keith, 1987 and Keith ,Reimers, Fehrmann, Pottebaum and Aubey, 1986) . If possible, discuss trips to the library and other ways to motivate kids to read.

m) Prepare for the confernce. Discuss the student's progress with other teachers so as to discern if he/she is doing well or poorly in other classes.

n) Help to put the parent or step parent at ease. Some parents attend the P-T-C with the enthusiam of a visit to the dentist's office for a root canal job. Be patient with people who may feel awkward.

o) Work on interpersonal skills and diplomacy and tact. Establish a warm friendly atmosphere.

p) If additional time is needed, say so. It may be necessary to simply cursorily review a child at the first parent teacher conference of the year, and then go into depth about a specific problem later in private.

q) Recognize that there are limitations to the P-T-C. Some conferences are held too early in the year when the teacher does not really know the child. Other conferences are held much too late in the year to do any good and the news is very bad (Your child is to be retained in the third grade). Teachers must work toward a " happy medium " .

r) The teacher may want to review the cumulative file of the child in preparation for the confernce.

s) Suggest positive steps to take and get a committment from the parent to " follow up " on these steps in a consistent manner.

t) Encourage parents to become involved in P.T.A. activities if such an organization exists at your school.

u) Have resource names (tutors , guidance counselors etc) available and handy.

v) Be careful when dealing with angry adults and explosive ones. Get help with irate people with complaints- legitimate or otherwise. Try not to interrupt as this may escalate the situation. Whatever you do, do not be goaded into a physical altercation- if it seems like it may come to this- RUN ! AND GET HELP ! If you are in a potential situation in which you expect to deal with a lot of hostile, angry parents St. John (1975) has a number of suggestions for dealing with these individuals.

w) Write up a note to the record regarding what transpired during the conference before you forget it.

x) Refer parents to age appropriate materials such as HIGHLIGHTS for children and ESSENTIAL LEARNING PRODUCTS (E.L.P.) for grade school and middle school stuents. E.L.P . has booklets to help in the practice of handwriting, spelling, study skills, reading, phonics, grammar, arithmetic and thinking skills. There are a number of other fine products available, and teachers should have access to a wide number of these resources.

y) Discuss reading habits and t.v. viewing habits. Two hours a day watching t.v. is too less hours doing homework, reading, reviewing, working on a science project or writing.

There are obviously many reasons for a conference :

1) The child enrolls or transfers to the school.

2) The parents want to know about the guidance program.

3) The child's school work seems too easy or too difficult.

4) The child must select courses.

5) The parent want to review the child's records or progress thus far .

6) The parents want to plan an educational program for their handicapped child.

7) The parents want to discuss career planning for their child.

8) The child shows a poor attitude toward school.

9) The child shows evidence of poor health.

10) The child needs to improve interpersonal relations with peers, teachers or parents.

11) The child shows evidence of emotional problems.

12) The child shows disruptive behavior at school or at home. (Ritchie, 1982, p. 402)

Many parents recognize the need for a parent teacher conference. They realize that report cards do not always give a true complete picture and they are legitimately concerned about their son or daughter. There are probably as many reasons for having a conference as there are students. Teachers must be prepared for these conferences as well as possible. Parents too, want their children to do well in school. How many parents do you know who do not want their children to do well ? Unfortunately, some parents do not have the necessary skills or tools- the parent teacher conference can be one important tool.

On the other hand, parents do have some vested interest in the conference and their children. Parents may want to consider asking questions such as :

Is my child in different groups for different subjects? Why ?

How well does my child get along with others ?

What are my child's best and worst subjects ?

Is my child working up to his or her ability ?

Does my child participate in class discussions and activities ?

Has my child missed any claases other than ones I contacted the school about ?

Have you noticed any sudden changes in the way my child acts ? For example, have you noticed any squinting, tiredness or modiness that might be a sign of physical or other problems ?

What kids of tests are being done ? What do the tests tell about my child's progress ? How does my child handle taking tests ? (N.E.A., 1987, p. 4-5)

It may be a good idea to write down the questions that you, as a parent, might have to ask so as to not waste time. In addition, before parents go to the school they may want to " write notes about :

- things about your child's life at home, personality, problems, habits, and hobbies you feel it's important for the teacher to know.

- your concerns about the school's programs or policies

-questions about your child's progress.

- how you and the school can work together to help your child. (N.E.A., 1987 p. 3-4)

Parents should also be ready to discuss the behavior and development of their child at home . Parents should be ready to discuss the following salient information :

"-Your child's reaction to school

-Health and emotional problems

-Hobbies, special interests and abilities

-Homework- how and where

-Rules and reponsibilities at home

-The type of discipline that works at home " (N.E.A., 1987 p. 5)

In addition, there is a multitude of salient, relevant germaine information that may be helpful for teachers to know. If a child's pet has just died, this may explain sudden lapses in attention. A pending divorce may result in a drop in grades. One student observed his father having a heart attack. While the father recovered, the son was still concerned about his father dying.

In many instances, due to work obligations, duties and responsibilities, there are some parents who do not come in to the school for conferences. Teachers should recognize

that some parents (nurses, firemen, policement etc) do have time constraints and work strange shifts. Teachers (and parents) can use the phone if possible. Teachers can try to contact the non-working parent (if there is one) and still attempt to drop a note- hopefully a positive one- to communicate with parents. Teachers can try a wide variety of alternative meeting times- either before or after school, at the supermarket, at the basketball game or allow parents to suggest a mutually convenient time. Teachers in these scenarios should start with small goals first- to establish contact in many cases is a major success. Teachers can then work toward on-going contact and other goals.

Prior to and after a conference, parents may want to take the following self inventory and think about their answers. The inventory is from Reid (1991) :

1) Am I setting a good example for my child by showing him/her that I value education ? Or do I say negative things such as " I dropped out of school because of problems just like yours, and I imagine you will too " or " I dropped out of school and look how well I turned out " or " I never have used much that I learned in school ".

2) Am I insisting that my child spend some time studying uninterrrupted in a quiet place every day ?

3) Do I encourage my child to read for enjoyment ?

4) Do I allow him/her to feel that school is interferring with his/her real life by permitting outside activities or a job to have priority over school assignments ?

5) Do I speak poorly of teachers in general because of a bad experience of personal prejudice ? (p. 15)

This paper has tried to review the parent teacher conference and offer some guidelines regarding this important meeting. Both parent and teacher can and should work together to enhance the learning and reading of children in schools.

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Endnote : The address for HIGHLIGHTS is 2300 West Fifth Ave P.O. Box 1823345 Columbus, Ohio 43272-4705 and for Essential Learning Products is 2300 West Fifth Ave P.O. Box 2607 Columbus, Ohio 43272-4247